

Birds of a Feather

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Birds of a Feather

by [Her Madjesty](#)

Summary

Aleksander woos her as the birds do, with preening and nesting and gentle songs, while hiding the spots on his wings that have been spattered with blood.

Notes

Happy belated birthday, nanasalt! This piece turns the politics of the Shadow and Bone television show into play-doh; there are new ambitions, new approaches to the world, etc. I've also played it fast and loose with the Little Palace timeline; thus, the "canon divergence" tag. Come for something a little different; stay for the pining.

I. Preening

They arrive at the Little Palace with the rising sun. Even at a distance, Aleksander can trace the familiar lines of its towers, its mess, its grand windows – all lovingly crafted by the Fabrikators that came before. It fills something in him that once seemed empty, the sight of the orange morning light catching on the white stone.

The otkazat'sya cannot readily identify the boundary that separates the Little Palace from the rest of the world. The moment their horse crosses it, though, Aleksander relaxes. The horse itself – their fourth in the past two weeks, and this one from his own stables – seems to pull at a faster pace, eager to make it back to familiar stalls and hay.

The Sun Summoner winces. Aleksander does not adjust his grip on her, does not offer her words of comfort. The sun rises behind them; like it or not, the glowing windows are set to welcome her home.

They only slow when the front gates come into view. Aleksander's Grisha, dressed already in their whites, golds, and reds, let the golden wings swing open. He feels the Sun Summoner's back go stiff, but she does not throw herself from the horse, does not blind any of his men.

It is enough, for now.

Aleksander offers her a hand as he dismounts. She does not take it.

He summons one of the palace grooms with a motion, patting their sweating horse with the hand that's left empty. With a nod, one of his Grisha goes running for Genya and her staff. The Sun Summoner smells of smoke, sweat, and horse; he imagines he is not in much better shape himself. Even so, he refrains from commenting as they stand in one another's presence, awkwardly letting the rising sun warm the space between them.

“You will be well taken care of here,” he informs her, once the moment has dragged for too long. Already he can see the white and gold keftas moving inside of the palace's windows; Genya must have received his note. “Should you want for anything, my staff and the tsarina's will attend to you.”

“And should I want to go free?” the Sun Summoner asks.

Aleksander smiles. He looks her in the eye for the first time in days, sees the defiance bubbling there. It wars prettily with her exhaustion; he knows, for she has told him, that she is sore.

“You can always ask,” he tells her. With great care, however, he positions himself between her and the golden gate, now swinging shut. “But I think you'll find that there is more than enough within these walls to keep you occupied for some time.”

The Sun Summoner pouts. It's an impressive sight. Aleksander deliberately does not look at the flush of her bottom lip and instead nods past her head.

The Sun Summoner turns just in time to see Genya appear out of the Little Palace's gleaming halls, not a drop of sleep still present on her face. Aleksander would envy her under other circumstances, but he has long learned that there are benefits to wearing some semblance of one's feelings on their skin. In a manner of speaking.

His conversation with the staff is brief. The Sun Summoner's presence is a constant buzz at his side; he can feel her shifting as the staff surrounds her. Her urge to run is palpable. Even the guards in their general vicinity seem to sense it; Aleksander can see more than one man reaching for the sword he keeps on his belt. The few Inferni awake and on duty at this hour seem less concerned, though that he blames on his lack of foresight. Had he announced their arrival to more than just Genya – to the tsar and tsarina, perhaps, and by their Saints, he'll pay for that – perhaps their welcome would be more enthusiastic.

In delaying that particular introduction, though, he's won a few hours for himself. With a nod, he leaves Genya and the Sun Summoner to their tour. His measured steps carry him through the twisting halls of the palace and to his own chambers: the foyer, the war room, and the baths, wicked with the promise of freshly-warmed water.

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The next several days are something of a novelty. Aleksander hasn't had this much fun since he was a proper boy; it is though the world has granted him a playmate, though she does not seem terribly excited about her role.

He starts simply. His own black kefta has been tailored within an inch of its life, both traditionally-speaking and through the graces of the small sciences. In his first meeting with the tsar and tsarina, he keeps his accessories small, but each cuff is adorned with the golden links someone in the upper echelons of the royal community thoughtless deemed appropriate as gifts. He does not know if that unfortunately suitor is present today, but they add enough of a pop to his usual garb that he knows more than a few eyes come wandering his way.

The Sun Summoner's own eyes are obscured by the obscene veil Genya and the tsarina deemed to fit her with. He sees them only once, when she forces the thing out of the way and cracks a joke in such poor taste that he cannot help but laugh.

He notices the way her cheeks go pink when he does and files the information away. What he relishes most, is the way her shoulders seem to drop, a touch of her tension draining away.

He chases that high in the days that come. Yes, he attends meetings and writes letters and ensures all interested parties that the war against their enemies continues; he researches and meets with his mother, their quiet argument lost in the hallowed halls of her empty home. But on the Sun Summoner's second day, he dons a kefta with intricate silver embroidery. The thread covers his shoulders like a lion's mane and catches her eye when they cross one another's paths on the grounds. She does not smile at him, but the nod she gives him is more than enough progress. Aleksander nods in response and goes about his business, idly trying to stamp down the surge of smugness that makes a comfortable nest in his chest.

He does not see her the following day, but they have a meeting with David, the Fabrikator, the next. The lining of this kefta is a deep purple – black to everyone too far away to study him. He leaves it hanging open as he enters David’s studio, a decision odd enough that even the distractible man, bless him, throws him an odd look in between his experiments. Aleksander schools his expression and directs David towards the Sun Summoner when she enters, if only to keep her from awkwardly lingering in the doorway.

He watches as David wraps long swaths of ribbon around her wrists, then sets them aside to measure them properly. All the while, Aleksander peppers the room with idly chatter. He fiddles with his cufflinks in a way he never would under other circumstances, drawing the light to them where his fingers are so much more used to shadow.

The Sun Summoner asks him about his horses, after some time, and he dives into the topic with gusto. He refrains from reciting the lineage of his stock, if only because revealing just how long he’s been cultivating the line of mares in the stables would perhaps be too much information for both her and David alike. Instead, he tells her stories of their rearing, of the sugar cubes he snuck to them when the grooms weren’t looking, of the saddle blankets David enchantments to protect them when he rides into battle.

They leave the fitting in one another’s company and take tea in one of the public-facing gardens. The Sun Summoner smiles at him more than once. Her cheeks are flushed; the shakiness in her hands is not gone, but it has lessened since their days together in the field.

Aleksander leaves for a meeting with the taste of lemon on his lips and a monster roaring, delighted, in his belly.

II. Gifts

That first week passes...smoothly.

Though Aleksander’s wardrobe grows more elaborate, little else changes in the Little Palace. Minor fetes are scheduled with the tsarina’s allies; dinners are held; guests are entertained. Aleksander is set to remain in this place for the rest of the month, and yet these early moments seem to slip through his fingers like sand.

What little he sees of the Sun Summoner is productive. She warms, now, to greet him – either a clever trick of her own or the genuine results of his own labors; he’s not yet certain. He remains nothing but kind to her, though. They spend the occasional spare minutes walking in the halls together. He encounters her in the library more than once, though often with the Apparat trailing at her every step. The monster that’s taken root in his stomach doesn’t appreciate the passing of the man’s eyes over the Summoner’s wrists, fingers, neck, but to overreact would be to play his hand too soon. So he watches, and the shadows shiver as he paces through the stacks. He tracks the books that the Sun Summoner cradles to her chest, notes what stories she likes best.

Her tentative interest in the amplifiers does not worry him. She is new to the world of Grisha and small sciences; there are thousands of things for her to learn beyond what the otkazat'sya have taught her. Whatever knowledge she wishes, he will more than happily provide her.

It is this thought that ushers in a new wave of attacks. Well, no – it is the West Ravnans who usher in a new wave of attacks, not to mention the abrupt appearance of a Fjerdan raiding party towards the northern edge of the Fold. It is, instead, a combination of the Summoner's kefta in the library and his abrupt need to return to the front that lets him approach her in a new way.

He invites her for an evening nightcap, which she politely declines, citing a previous engagement with two of the Grisha she's been training with. Patiently, Aleksander suggests a private lunch the next day instead, ideally in his war room. The Sun Summoner eyes him with a glimmer of the same suspicion she bore when they rode to the Little Palace together, pursing her lips.

Aleksander has grown quite used to studying the finer parts of her face, as to better ignore the whole. He trains his gaze on an eyelash that's settled on her cheek and tries not to find it endearing.

“Tea,” the Sun Summoner poses instead. She crosses her arms over her chest and lifts her chin, as though daring him to disagree. “And in the sun room near the library.”

Aleksander does his best not to groan. “While I am delighted that you’re taking more of an interest in your element,” he tells her, “I have to insist on my chambers. I intend to discuss private matters that I’d rather not be overheard.”

The Sun Summoner raises an eyebrow. He watches her mull the thought over, then sees her come to a decision.

“I know a place,” she tells him – as though he did not build this palace from the ground up; as though his hands were not as spattered with mortar and brick as the rest of the builders’. “I will meet you in your foyer, but only if you come with me after.”

It is enough. Aleksander acquiesces and watches with warring senses of suspicion and pride as victory paints a picture of the Sun Summoner’s face. She walks away with her head held high.

It’s a good look on her. He allows himself the thought, then tucks all others away as he disappears off to a meeting of his own.

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Aleksander meets her as requested later the next day, with the sun coming in high through the Little Palace’s many windows. The Sun Summoner’s hair is tucked at the base of her neck, and her cheeks are flushed. She nods when she spots him, then moves to guide him down the hall like a village girl leading a stray pup. Aleksander bristles at the mental comparison but says nothing, following dutifully while fiddling with the treasure in his pocket.

(It is a borrowed token, this little thing; a ring made out of a curled spoon. Were he a less subtle man, he would thank Malyen Oretsev for making his job easier. There are letters, of course, leaving the palace that he's had his people intercept; the only one to come in, however, bore this small gift. Whoever Malyen Oretsev is, he seems to vastly underestimate the tokens needed to hold a young woman's affections. Aleksander does not have so much faith in the world as to bank on the boy's ignorance, but if this other man is truly so confident as to string the Sun Summoner along, then perhaps he can reconsider his concern regarding other suitors.)

They walk for several minutes, passing other Grisha and no small amount of the staff. Aleksander knows the halls of the Little Palace like the back of his hand, but the Summoner guides him through smaller halls – ones he has not felt the need to pass through in some time.

It isn't until they start to climb a set of stairs hidden in one of the smallest towers that he realizes where she's taking him.

It isn't an observation tower – not properly. Once he realized its poor positioning, he had all elements related to the study of the lay of the land relocated to the western towers. It is easier, or so his Fabrikators say, to study the movement of the planets over the land there.

Here, though, it is clear that the Sun Summoner has been busy. The abandoned tower is just starting to fill with rolls of paper, though Aleksander cannot fathom as to where she's getting them from. He can see charcoal sketches fluttering in a distant wind, and maps – amateur maps, but maps none the less of the Little Palace and the surrounding grounds.

The Sun Summoner does not beam at him as they make their way inside. She does not revel in her secret. Instead, she walks to the little table she's set up in the middle of the room and pulls out a chair for him to sit in. She does not make eye contact. Already, Aleksander can see her reconsidering this decision; she is sharing something with him, and she cannot tell whether or not it was a good idea.

He releases the meaningless object in his pocket. It is jewelry; it is nothing, nothing that she will consider worthwhile.

If he wants to make a point, he must do so precisely.

And so he sits.

The Sun Summoner pours tea for the both of them, then pushes a tray of cookies in his direction. It is a simple, if effective service, even if the tea is cooling. Aleksander adds a lump of sugar to his cup, letting the sound of bird song lull the both of them into some semblance of peace.

"Don't tell me this spot is forbidden to residents," the Sun Summoner says, eventually. Aleksander hides his smile behind his cup. "I won't stop coming here."

"Nowhere in the Little Palace is forbidden to Grisha," he tells her. After a healthy pause – enough time for her shoulders to drop and her face to relax – he clears his throat. "And I must

admit, I fear banning you from any part of this residence would be to invite mischief, and frankly, I have to deal with enough of that on the front.”

That earns him a snort. Aleksander does not waste time mentally patting himself on the back, though he takes a moment to consider doing so.

It’s enough of a lead to let him breach his primary point – he’s returning to the front, and he’s warning her before she goes. She blinks at him, surprise coming and going over her face. She’s far too new to this world to successfully hide the emotion, but it’s clear that she’s been taking her conversations with Genya seriously. Aleksander lets the announcement sit between the two of them, carefully watching the birds flitting away from one of the many open windows instead of studying her reaction.

“Are they sending you after the West Ravkans?” the Sun Summoner asks, at last. “Or will you go north?”

“I’d prefer to go north,” Aleksander answers – and chides himself; his tone is too honest. He can only offer hints. Already, the Sun Summoner’s face is losing some of its color.

Not one to lose an opportunity, though, he continues. “It appears that the Fjerdans are targeting a Grisha contingent I have in that area – they pass refugees east, make sure they have the supplies they need to remain safe. If they’re harmed or captured, we lose fledgling access to the north. That is the cost of the fools’ superstitions; endless Grisha lives.” He scowls at the table, distantly aware of the way the shadows in this small room have grown darker.

The Sun Summoner seems to notice as well – but she does not call on her own power to stop him. She does not reach out to comfort him, though, either, and thus Aleksander is left to bring himself back under control on his own.

“Do you know which camp they’ll send you to?” she asks. Her tone is almost placating. There’s an undercurrent of eagerness to it, though. Aleksander, already fighting his weariness, feels a flash of anger deep in his chest. That familiar monster snarls, tearing the name Malyen Oretsev to pieces.

“I suspect towards Ivets,” he says, flippant. “There’s a tangent of the Second in the area that claims the Shu Han are moving to ally with our friends in the West.” His cup of tea does not rattle when he sets it on the table, though the Sun Summoner still flinches. “I may not be able to pass through the Fade, but I can offer more deliberate strategies from up close.” He smiles, a wry and terrible thing. “My presence also tends to deter the kinds of attacks that put our people at risk.”

The Sun Summoner frowns. He’s ready to chalk this tea up to a loss; it’s a shame, but they’ll have more time to work through these problems when he returns. Aleksander takes a deep breath, then makes a deliberate effort of wiping the frustration from his face. He reaches out, palm up, but does not move to take the Sun Summoner’s hand in his. Instead, he lets her study it where it rests in the middle of the table.

"You would honor me," he tells her, "if you would keep me abreast of your studies here. I expect Baghra will approach you in my absence; I encourage you to take her up on any offers she makes, should she wish to tutor you."

He can see the visible relief in her face as he changes the subject and almost laughs as she wrinkles her nose.

"I've...heard she's quite a persuasive tutor," she says.

"She's of an older breed," he agrees. "But there's no one who can bring you up to speed like her. Your gifts are unique, after all."

"So I've been told," the Summoner grumbles.

Aleksander pulls his hand back at that, something clicking in the back of his head. With something like a genuine smile, he leans back, studying the panels of the roof far above their heads. "When she tried to teach me," he says, thinking back through centuries of memories, "I couldn't stand her manners. What I could do was so strange to most – so steeped in terrible histories and rumors – it was difficult to get anyone to truly help me grow. She pushed until I felt I would break, but she was the only one who made me feel...."

He trails off, but he can see understanding in the Summoner's eyes. The hand not clinging to her tea cup twitches, as though she wants to extend it. Aleksander does not look at it, doesn't let her see him studying her. Instead, he shakes his head and clears his throat. It is a deliberate movement, but one made in earnest, too; memories of his mother's lessons are brutal things.

"In any case, I did not ask to meet with you to discuss politics or tutoring," he tells her, offering what he hopes can be a boyish smile. "I have a gift for you, rather. One that I hope you'll accept in exchange for a letter or two."

The Sun Summoner composes herself with an expression that is part amused, part suspicious. "That's not so much a gift as it is a bribe, then, is it?"

Aleksander affects offense, pressing a hand to his chest. "Miss Starkov, I would never." He bypasses the treasure in his pocket entire, reaching instead for the finest pen he carries on his person. It bears the touch of David's small sciences, and its balance is near perfect. He holds it between two fingers before passing it across the table, watching the Sun Summoner's eyes go wide as she accepts it.

"Your talent hasn't gone unnoticed," he says, nodding towards her many maps around the room. "I suspect this will serve you better than the pieces of charcoal you've managed to squirrel out of the library."

The Sun Summoner does not seem to hear him. She rises from the table, instead, reaching automatically for one of her many scraps of paper. Aleksander watches as she moves for her inkwell, then glances back in his direction.

"You don't need that," he tells her, trying his best not to sound smug. "It is already full. I only need to refill it once a moon, though I suspect you may need to do so more often."

That wins him a smile. “Thank you,” the Sun Summoner says, genuine appreciation in her voice.

“Of course.” Aleksander shrugs. “I’ve had a proper cartographer’s kit sent to your room, as well – you can pair that with some of the tools that I suspect you’re more familiar with.”

He has not sent a kit ahead to her room, but he’ll have to see one placed there before he leaves. It’s worth it, if nothing else, for the sheer joy on the Sun Summoner’s face. She doesn’t think to school it as she comes back to the table; rather, she stares at the pen he’s given her like it’s a star he’s plucked from the sky.

“This is *a lot*,” she tells him – and it sounds genuine and like an admonishment. “I suppose this is worth a letter or two.”

“You honor me,” Aleksander says again. When the Summoner glances at him, he affects a smile coy enough to make her flush.

It’s another step forward – one of many he knows he needs to take. If the gentle conversation throughout the rest of their tea means anything, though, then it’s a play made in his favor.

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He returns to his proper blacks when he returns to the field. The horses from his stable carry him first south, where he dispatches a Second Army scouting party without so much as dismounting. After a brief meeting with the contingent in the area, he rides north, passing within inches of the Fold to join up with the Novo-Kribirsk division.

The fur on his shoulders protects him from the cold, if not from the startled looks of the otkazat’sya he passes by. His return to the field is clearly a surprise – though he hopes it is one that will work in the nation’s favor.

Though his saturation dims down to near nothingness, the gifts to the Sun Summoner do not stop. When he receives the first of her letters, he ransacks his holding for something to return to her. In the back of his mind, he knows she’ll think it a bribe, but he doesn’t care. He will train her like a pup if he must; anything to reward even these somewhat stilted interactions.

They must have a groundwork to build on. The scaffolding must be in place.

His response is brief but grateful. The messenger he sends back to the Little Palace carries both that scrap of paper and toffees, local to the area.

As he moves, the gifts differ. When he visits Arkesk, he takes care to pass along a quick sketch of the area. The Balakna contingent has little to spare, so he requests the aid of a local Inferni and carefully, quickly dries forget-me-nots to press between two sheets of paper. She thanks him profusely for that one, so he sends more when he is able, decorating what words he manages to share with native flora from Asha, Kazan, and Lipki.

He stops with the Poliznaya contingent only once, and then, in passing. Aleksander does not mention the encounter in his letters, nor does he allow himself to linger. He makes a point,

though, to look over the First Army roster himself, studying each name with care.

Malyen Oretsev, unfortunately, seems to be clinging to life. His injuries from the most recent attempt to cross the Fade seem to have rendered his gait uneven; he has not returned to the field, by all accounts, but the healer on-site seems determined to return him to good health.

Aleksander closes his eyes. He thinks.

The head of the First Army contingent bears a note with his signature when he rides away from camp. With any luck, it will put an end to the Malyen problem for the foreseeable future.

Aleksander sends the Sun Summoner pressed lilacs from the next town over. He promises to return to the Little Palace within the next two months.

Her response, when he receives it, says that she'll be excited to meet him at the gates. Overwhelmed from lack of sleep and an ever-throbbing hatred for all things *otkazat'sya*, he clings to her words and does not let himself think about what that desperation means.

III. Nesting

If asked – though by who, he cannot imagine – Aleksander cannot put a date to when the “Sun Summoner” became “Alina.” But she does.

It takes him the better part of his promised two months to return to the Little Palace. On the day that he does, he wakes before the sun rises. He travels fastest in the dark, as do the horses from his stables. The one that leads him to the front gates, just before the sun kisses the horizon, is so dark that her coat appears almost blue.

He'd written letters ahead, let the staff know that he was coming. The only parties there to greet him when he arrives, though, are the gates' guards.

The guards, that is, and Alina.

The darkness has never blinded him, not like it blinds other people. He looks past the uniforms, then, and cannot quantify the thump thump thumping of his heart in his chest as the sight of her, sleep-dazed but *there*, waiting for him at the gate. She's dressed in little more than a night dress and a black kefta she's clearly just thrown on; the guards, Aleksander notices, are deliberately directly their eyes anywhere but her exhausted form.

He does not remember riding through the gates; does not remember dismounting. Between one blink and the next, his feet touch the ground and his hands are rising to gently grip her elbows. “What are you doing here?” he asks, his voice rough from the miles and the chill. “You should be asleep.”

“One could say the same of you,” Alina chides. She bites back a yawn; he watches her jaw flex as she does and casually slips his arm through hers in the moment of distraction. She raises an eyebrow at him as he starts to lead the two of them from the gate, but she does not shake him off.

Aleksander blinks and briefly wonders if he is still dreaming. Behind him, his mare neighs her farewells as the guards go and retrieve one of the grooms from the stable.

“I was not expected until much later in the day,” Aleksander notes. Even kept quiet, his voice echoes through the promenade.

Alina stiffens on his arm. There is – or was, rather – an openness about her upon his approach that made the past few months seem like almost nothing; he cannot help but wonder what kind of boon his letters might have offered her when she was here, alone. She’d reported back on what friends she’d had, on her training, on Baghra, but never once had she mentioned the loneliness that now radiates off of her like a fog.

“I could feel you coming,” she says at last. Aleksander shakes himself from his thoughts.

“Come again?”

The darkness does not hide her flush; it glows just as beautifully as the sun lingering beneath the horizon behind them. She looks up at him through her eyelashes, curious, and Aleksander feels as though he’s been struck.

“I could feel you coming,” she repeats. Though his hands are gloved, there is a touch of wrist that remains exposed to the fall’s cold. Her fingers graze it, and there is a light between them all at once. “Can you not sense me?”

In truth, he has not tried. The Little Palace is swarming with guards and gossips; he does not need the small sciences to connect the two of them. He reaches out now, though, as her fingers drift away from his skin – and yes, there she is; sitting on the edge of his consciousness like a warm fire in the distance.

“I didn’t know we could do that,” he says in earnest. Alina seems to thaw at the shock in his voice.

“Baghra told me it may be possible,” she admits, her steps visibly lighter. “You woke me, you know. I could feel you on the horizon like a storm.”

Aleksander rubs the back of his neck with his freehand, thoroughly wrong-footed. “I shall endeavor to move more lightly in the future, then.”

Alina is not looking at him, he notes; rather, she stares forward at the Little Palace with an expression that is almost smug. “I believe that’s my job,” she informs him with a gentle sniff. “Can you perhaps move darkly instead?”

The laugh that wins out of him echoes against the cold stone. Aleksander lets her wander away from him upon their entry into the front foyer, too stunned with the morning, the cold,

and her to manage much else.

(And it has been too long, says the voice in the back of his head, too long if he is so off-kilter now. He needs to take time, recoup, *rest* so that when the two of them meet again, he is the one back in control. But he watches her go, her dress blowing in the wind, and reminds himself that this is what he wanted; that this is the machinery with which he will build a better future for the both of them – for all of the Grisha under his command.)

In what time he spends away from the sheets, however, he thinks. He schemes. He plans.

Come the hours after dinner and the morning to follow, he does what he does best. Aleksander watches.

Alina has retained her friends among the other Grisha, it seems. A few more appear to have warmed to her. While they do not flock together, bird-like in their manner, they do find one another in the halls. They smile and tell secrets and link arms to move from one task to another. Genya, it appears, has become Alina's true confidant – her letters indicated as much, but there is a kernel of truth to the women's interactions that leaves Aleksander both warmed and unsure.

He makes his way to Alina's observation tower when she herself is occupied, determine to mark out the matter of the room for himself. It is clear, almost immediately upon entering, that she has not abandoned it. While it appears that his staff have somehow continued to overlook it, she has built for herself a treasure trove of paper, tools, and maps. The Little Palace sprawls out before her in rolls of paper; both the main levels and those that tunnel beneath it. There are separate sheets for the servants' quarters and passages. Aleksander tours these quickly and is relieved to find some key details missing – namely, any details regarding his own rooms and mention of those tunnels that lead outside of the grounds.

There is more to the tower, however, than just the maps. Alina's desk remains perched in the center of the room, and there is evidence in one corner of a small bucket fire. She has tried to warm herself, then, in the time she's spent here; she's made a proper nest in his home.

It is not her rooms, but then again, it was never going to be. Here is a woman who has spent her life with luxury just out of reach. This tower suits her. She is making it her own.

The monster in Aleksander's belly purrs. He paces through the tower once, then again, then retreats back to his own lair.

There is no time for a proper private meal, but Aleksander does see Alina when he sees the rest of his flock. Come each supper, they exchange glances from across the long table. But then the tsarina is at his ear, demanding stories of his time in the field, and Aleksander is obligated to share what he knows.

It is as it was before – politics prevent him from wandering the halls of the Little Palace as often as he would like. In what time he has to spare, however, he goes to work. David welcomes him with open arms and helps him build a kefta from the ground up; Alina's borrowed blues, while beautiful, will not suit. His own coloration brightens in these hallowed halls, but there is always a shadow about him.

If they are to be partners, they must mirror one another.

He does not deliver the new kefta to his room herself; rather, he is embroiled in an argument with the stable master while Genya does his dirty work for him. When he sees Alina later that day, she is not wearing her new gift, but she offers him a small smile in addition to her standard nod, and that is a start.

He makes a point of wearing gold with his ensemble to dinner that evening. She retains her borrowed blues, but the look she gives him *then* seems one part startled, another impressed.

Alina walks the halls of the Little Palace the next day in black. The rumor mill begins to churn.

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He does not bring her flowers as frequently now that they are in the same place, though for some time, he cannot bring himself to think on why. There is no shame in walking the halls of the Little Palace with a bouquet in hand, but somehow it feels...wrong, as though he is putting a part of himself on display that he doesn't yet want the others here to see.

There is an itch in the back of his mind, though, one that tastes like sunlight on a frosted field. If he closes his eyes, he can pinpoint it; can track Alina as she wanders, as she disappears from her chambers to stare into the night sky and add to her many maps.

So he moves in secret.

He knows she will not set another fire in her tower, not with the quality of her paper at risk. Instead, when she is occupied, he moves up into the space himself, leaving behind one of the cloaks that he so often wears in the field. The fur at its throat is unbearable in the summer; with the growing cold, he knows it has the potential to keep her warm.

He contemplates asking David about the logistics of a firebox. Dismissing the idea, he turns instead to other practicalities – simple things, for if he knows anything of Alina at this point, it is that any sign of luxury will leave her eyes narrowed and their conversations cool for days.

It is here, then, that he commissions the gloves.

There are two sets he wants to make; one for practicality, and the other for warmth. The practical set he delegates to David, looking for amplifiers without heading off into the winter cold. The tailored set he leaves to Genya's experts, working through her to court good rabbit and mink to suit his darker colors.

Alina finds him two days after he leaves his cloak for her in his tower and one after he places his orders. She stops in the middle of the hall while he's mid-conversation and leans against the nearest wall, waiting for him to finish arguing with one of the tsar's many ministers. He meets her gaze over his head and almost winces for the effort – he does not know how much more powerful she's become, but her glare has sharpened so much that it's like looking into the sun.

When the minister takes his leave, Aleksander tucks his hands behind his back, waiting for his chiding.

To his surprising, it's not immediate. Instead, Alina steps forward to replace the minister at his side, and the two of them begin to walk together.

"I think I preferred your flowers," she says at last, somewhere between the classrooms and the students' mess.

Aleksander smiles at the pack of young Grisha passing them by, then waits for the hall to empty before answering. "It gets cold later in the year, here," he tells her. "You'll thank me when the first snow comes."

"I've seen snow plenty," Alina huffs. It's more endearing than it should be. "I was managing just fine before you returned home."

The word lights something in him: *home*. Aleksander carefully schools his expression as they continue down the hall. "Of that I have no doubt," he replies. "If you'd like, I'd be more than happy to take it back. I can already tell that my presence is making the tsar and tsarina uncomfortable; I'll need a replacement, if nothing else, before they send me back into the field."

He means it lightly, but Alina's steps still falter. When he looks down at her, he can see her frowning down at the polished floor.

"Are – are you leaving again soon?"

She sounds so unsure, so unlike herself, that he stops walking at once. Aleksander turns and guides her against the wall, keeping the two of them in parallel so as not to cause any alarm. "I rarely have the chance to stay here as long as I'd like," he admits, pitching his voice soft. "I will be here for a week more, at least, though after that, it is up to the tsar to say."

Alina's frown deepens. He sees her clench her hands into fists and moves without thinking, grazing his fingers over her knuckles. She flinches but does not pull away.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "What happened while I was away?"

Alina does not look at him. He can see the distorted light from the window playing against her face; it leaves one of her eyes bright while the other falls into shadow.

"...I didn't realize how alone I was until you went away," she says. It is a tender gift, offered to him on a silver platter. He feels hapless in the face of it, blinking like a newborn in the sunlight.

This time, he does not hesitate. He takes her hands in his and holds them, tucking them against his chest. He can feel the warmth radiating off of her like a stove and wonders, idly, if she finds him cold.

"I am sorry that I cannot be here more often," he tells her, voice full of genuine understanding. "I know that loneliness well."

"And the pressure?" Alina looks up at him now, her brown eyes exhausted. "They expect me to do so much, Kirigan, but every day I fall short of their demands. I'm trying to do as best as I can, but it never feels like enough!"

Aleksander feels her twitching beneath him, feels her long to pull away. She is a treacherous thing, his Sun Summoner; a frightened animal, the winter wind. Carefully, he tucks both of her hands into one of his, then uses the other to lift up her chin.

"You are more than enough," he tells her. "And you will only grow with time. Even the other Grisha cannot understand what kind of responsibilities you have; they will work with you, but you cannot let them reach you. Do you understand?"

Alina blinks. There's a dampness to her eyes, but no tears fall. "Is that what you do? Keep them all at arm's length?"

There's an accusation there, but he does not rise to the bait. "It is more often the case that they choose the distance," he tells her. "I, after all, am the one with a legacy at my back. Get too close to the Shadow Summoner, after all, and who knows what kind of dark things he may do to you."

He lets her chin drop, at that. There is more bitterness in his voice than he means, but he cannot bring himself to correct the mistake.

Alina, out of the corner of his eye, looks chastened. In their silence, he can count her breaths, can feel the warmth of the sun pulsing beneath her skin.

"...may I go with you, next time?" she asks, her voice quiet.

Aleksander starts, then immediately shakes his head.

"Please!" Alina says. "I'm good in the field; I've spent most of my life there. I'll keep training, and I'll stay out of the way, I promise."

"I know why you want to come," Aleksander answers. "I know that you feel alone. This isn't just the safest place for you, Miss Starkov; it is also the best place to learn."

There are still no tears on Alina's cheeks; instead, Aleksander sees them grow red. Anger snaps in the back of her throat and against the palms of his hands; even getting close to her feels like stepping into a fire.

She turns away from him and storms down the hall, her black kefta stark against the cool stone.

"Miss Starkov!" Aleksander calls, but his heart is not in it. He watches her disappear around the corner, then leans against the nearest wall.

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Come the end of the day, his march towards his chambers is slow. The rumor mill has gone quiet, but he dreads walking up and finding his offered cloak waiting in a heap at his door.

As he approaches, though, the hall is empty. His rooms are free of any mischief.

Aleksander locks the door behind him with a heavy sigh. It's difficult to tell, with the pulse of Alina's sunlight just rooms away, whether he's disappointed or not.

IV. Songs

Two events of note occur before the tsar demands his return to the field. Well, that's not quite true – several events of political note, including the appearance of a West Ravkan contingent uncomfortably close to the Little Palace, occur before Aleksander is forced from his home. Two, however, rank higher than the rest in importance:

Firstly, Alina, though she speaks little to him in the remaining time they have together, does not return his cloak. She accepts the gloves he offers her with a polite tone, and she wears them as the weather turns, but their conversations are otherwise cold. The prototypes David makes are dismissed out of hand as she displays what is, almost abruptly, a sharp uptick in the amount of power she wields.

Secondly, a letter arrives from the front.

It is one letter among many and, at first, is lost in the stack of documents Aleksander has long failed to attend to. When he recognizes the name of the First commander, however, he sets aside a careful ten minutes to lock his doors and pry open the seal.

The information inside is –

Well.

It is not Aleksander who moves to inform the Little Palace of the deaths in the Poliznaya contingent. Rather, it is General Kirigan. He calls together a meeting of those he deems of the highest ranks and informs them of the truth: that the contingent had sent men to negotiate with West Ravka, and that West Ravka had returned their heads.

Malyen Oretsev's body has been buried in the fields of Poliznaya with the rest of them. Aleksander does not say his name, but he can see Alina read it on the contingent's updated roster; can see her give way to grief. She retreats from that meeting without so much as a backwards glance, but still, he considers it a victory.

With West Ravka to blame, after all, even her misplaced affections can be of use to him.

He feels her pacing long into the night – that sense of her is improving, especially in this closed space. When she retreats to her tower, he considers following. He knows, though, that his presence is not wanted. In turn, he does not sleep, waiting for the sense of her to fade back into her rooms. His exhausted mind conjures a hundred alternatives she might pursue in her grief. Though he is far from coherent, he considers it a gift that he is awake to stop her.

She slinks back into that quiet space just moments before the sun rises. Aleksander groans, presses the heels of his palms against his eyes, and pushes himself up off the floor.

Within the hour, he is given his next destination. He has a day to pack his things, then the tsar wishes him to depart for the far north. His Heartrenders are already moving to position themselves to take in the West Ravkans who've moved so deep into the home country's territory.

At the same time, the tsarina puts forward the guest list for the Winter Fete. In his final briefing, she takes Aleksander aside and bids him bring the Sun Summoner to perform; the people, after all, are growing anxious for good news with the approach of another winter.

Aleksander promises both of their attendance and leaves the tsarina's chambers more exhausted than he entered. He stalls for as long as he can, after, but there is no avoiding the task at hand.

He abandons his kefta in his room in exchange for something white; the brightest of the things he owns.

The doors to Alina's chambers are marbled and intricate, with images of a hunt and a stag carved into their make. He does not bother to knock on them as he looks for her; does not stop by her rooms at all. Aleksander does, however, stop a full floor before entering her tower, standing in a stairwell so cramped that he has to bow his head to maneuver through it.

"They have me leaving tomorrow," he calls up, listening to his own voice echo back at him.
"May I join you?"

For a long moment, no one answers. He can feel her, though, sitting in the center of that blasted tower, no doubt freezing out of sheer stubbornness. She pulses like a second heartbeat beneath his ribs, and it aches that he cannot go to her without asking.

Eventually, she answers. There are no words, only a noise of ascent so clogged with tears that Aleksander does not hesitate. He takes the steps two at a time only to stand in the doorway at the sight of Alina hunched over, curled up in his cloak and weeping.

The shock does not last. Almost at once, he goes to her. He drops to his knees and wonders, idly, what to do with his hands, what he's ever done with his hands around women before. Eventually, he grasps loosely at her shoulders, feeling them shake as she tries to pull herself back together.

He does not know how long they sit like that together. Eventually, though, she crawls her way into his lap, her cheeks red and wet with grieving. Aleksander holds her, petting her hair and mumbling nothing, meaningless words into the curtains of her hair.

The words – and he could not repeat them if he tried – give way, eventually, to humming. There is nothing but quiet around them, quiet and the wind, so he does his best to fill it. He hums songs once sung to him by his mother and her ken; by the women in the village where he grew up. When he runs out, he transitions into bawdier tunes, old songs he heard in

taverns when he was little more than a soldier in another war. Alina chuckles at these; he can feel her body shake in his arms, but he does not dare let her go.

“I didn’t think generals knew all those songs,” she whispers, her throat raspy and raw.

“I wasn’t always a general,” Aleksander tells her. “A soldier is a soldier is a soldier.”

Alina huffs, as affirmative as it is an answer. She shifts in his lap, lifting her head so it no longer fits so comfortably beneath his jaw. Aleksander loosens his hold on her only slightly, better to look her in the eye as she speaks.

There are words on her lips; he can see them there. Even so, she hesitates.

“Don’t go.”

Her fingers tighten on his shirt. Her nightdress shifts against his legs; he can feel the warmth of her through a nothing layer of fabric and bites back the softest of groans.

“Please,” Alina begs, sniffing as she does. “Don’t leave me here alone.”

Aleksander opens his mouth. Sighs. Closes it again. He draws her close to him again, expecting resistance, but she goes all the way, tucking her face into the crook of his neck and shaking in his silence.

“To disobey the tsar is to invite death,” he tells her (and this is a seed, too, though one he does not mean to plant). “But I am loathed to disobey you.”

Alina snuffles, her knuckles white as she holds him close. Aleksander matches his breathing to hers and tries not to think too hard on the moment, focusing on the fall of her hair, instead.

“Will you do something for me, then?” she asks.

“Anything,” he answers. “Anything I can.”

When she pulls back, the familiar fire is back in her dark eyes. Aleksander watches her swallow, bite her lip, brace herself, and wonders if he’s not supposed to want to kiss her.

“Kill them for me,” she says, a commander in the night. “The West Ravkans. The Fjerdans. Kill them for me.” She pauses, then softens, then becomes just a girl again. “Then come home.”

Resolve like steel hardens in his chest. Aleksander nods once, then again. On a whim, he reaches out and takes one of her hands from his shirt, then presses her knuckles to his lips.

“If it is revenge you want, Alina Starkov,” he says, “then it is revenge that I will give you.”

Alina smiles at him in the darkness, a star in the night.

Aleksander holds her until the sun starts to peek above the horizon. He carries her to her rooms himself. He does not wake her before he goes, only leaves behind a note and the

smallest of his rings, once worn on his left pinkie.

The grooms saddle his horse. The Inferni bid him farewell. He rides into the morning, the sun in his eyes, and goes to see his work done.

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